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DIPLOMATS ON WORKING AT THE MFA

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Like Russia itself, the MFA is still attempting to come to terms with the vast societal changes that came with the end of the Soviet era. The Russian diplomatic corps of 4,500 is younger and includes more women than previously, but sexism remains very much in the open. The high number of applicants to the MFA is taken as a sign that being a diplomat remains prestigious despite the prospect of earning larger salaries elsewhere, but many see the Ministry as a way to a lucrative private sector job. The MFA takes pride in maintaining its emphasis on language ability, but an antiquated assignments process leaves some individuals with limited career options. Russian diplomats may face some of the same challenges as Americans, with concerns about postings, salaries, and the high cost of returning to the capital, but life within the MFA is qualitatively different than in the Department. Using largely anecdotal information gleaned from working-level contacts, we have attempted to illustrate various aspects of the life of Russian diplomats. End summary.

Today's Russian Diplomatic Corps  
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¶2. (U) MFA Director of Personnel Vladimir Morozov said in a recent interview that the Ministry consists of approximately 4,500 diplomats and 5,000 people in administrative and technical positions. Of these 9,500 MFA employees, about 3,000 are in Moscow and 6,500 overseas. The largest missions are in Washington, with 230 staff, and New York, with 180. The smallest are consulates in the Aland Islands in Finland, with one diplomat, and the Svalbard archipelago off the northern coast of Norway, with two diplomats.

¶3. (U) Women currently account for approximately 15 percent of Russian diplomats and one-third of all new applicants to join the MFA. Morozov attributed the increasing number of women to societal changes that have impacted a Ministry traditionally the "domain of the stronger sex." He justified this legacy by explaining that men were better equipped to handle long-term absences from home, harsh climates, and the "complex political and military situations" in which Russian diplomats often found themselves.

¶4. (U) According to Morozov, approximately a quarter of Russian diplomats are under 30. The MFA's ability to attract young people despite the heretofore strong Russian economy demonstrated that being a diplomat remained a prestigious occupation. The number of applicants has increased steadily over the last several years, allowing the Ministry to be more selective in its hiring.

¶5. (U) First DFM Denisov said in a separate interview that the large number of young diplomats showed that the MFA had rebounded from the disastrous 1990s, when a poor fiscal situation forced the Ministry to slash staffing levels, while low salaries led many diplomats to take jobs elsewhere. Despite the current increase in hiring, the MFA still felt

the effects of its lean years, which had created a shortage of mid-level officers. Denisov commented that as a result, Russian diplomacy continued to "rest on the shoulders" of professionals in their fifties.

Male, Pale and Yale  
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¶6. (SBU) While the U.S. Foreign Service may have become a more diverse institution, the Russian MFA remains a bastion of Slavic males who went to Moscow's top schools. Women seen within the building are typically secretaries or freshly minted attaches who have yet to go overseas. The highest ranked female diplomat we have met was Lyudmila Vorobieva, Deputy Director of the Department of ASEAN and Asia-Pacific Affairs, equivalent to a position somewhere between an office director and a DAS in the Department. The senior woman at the MFA appears to be Eleonora Mitrofanova, head of the Center for International, Scientific and Cultural Cooperation (Roszarubezhtsentr), which promotes Russian language and culture abroad.

¶7. (SBU) Public affairs is a part of the MFA where one may see more women at work, which one male diplomat said is "a good place for them." A similar comment was made by diplomats from the North America Department, who said about their lone female colleague to attend an Embassy reception that handling visa issues was the "right place for her." Such attitudes appear to be widespread, and are fostered in the universities from which Russian diplomats emerge. We were told that a professor at the school most diplomats attend greets his new international relations students as

MOSCOW 00003086 002 OF 004

"future Russian diplomats and their wives."

¶8. (SBU) Considering the sexism that runs rampant in the MFA, women are found in surprisingly high numbers in the Department of New Threats and Challenges, which deals with terrorism and transnational crime. When we commented upon this to Third Secretaries Maria Visloguzova and Svetlana Paraeva, they said that this reflected the fact that they worked in a newly created department that drew large numbers of recently arrived employees. There was also an ingrained belief among Russian diplomats that "real diplomacy," i.e. bilateral relations, had to be handled by men, whereas multilateral or global issues were suitable for women.

Moscow Universities: The Russian NFATC  
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¶9. (SBU) The MFA does not have a NFATC-type facility and relies upon Moscow universities to train and staff the diplomatic corps. The prestigious Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) is formally affiliated with the MFA and provides approximately two-thirds of the new diplomats hired. According to research by American Fulbright scholar Yelena Biberman, approximately 50-60 percent of international relations students at MGIMO plan to enter the MFA, although far fewer actually do. The school, which costs 7,000 Euros annually to attend, has become the leading university for those planning to enter the corporate or financial sectors, and has a reputation as the "hip" university attended by the children of the Russian elite. Many who intend to become diplomats find the school a great networking opportunity and opt to join the private sector instead. Other schools feeding students into the MFA are Moscow State University (MGU), St. Petersburg State University and the Diplomatic Academy, a MFA-affiliated graduate school that is a favored destination of Moscow "rich kids" who have graduated from MGIMO or MGU.

Language Driven Hiring  
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¶10. (U) Entering the MFA continues to depend upon language

proficiency, with all new hires studying a language for four to seven years in university and graduate school. The first requirement for applying to the MFA is passing a language exam administered by the universities, after which schools typically assess a student's academic performance and recommend them to the MFA. In his interview, personnel director Morozov said that the majority of Russian diplomats are proficient in at least two foreign languages, and bragged that the MFA had 70 polyglots who spoke five or more languages.

#### From the MFA to the Private Sector

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¶11. (SBU) Junior officers have told us that the MFA has become a place of employment for children of the new Russian elite, who are drawn to the prestige of being a diplomat and whose personal wealth offsets the low entry-level salaries of \$150-200 per month. For young people of more modest means, the MFA is often seen as a career stepping stone to the private sector, where a good starting salary is \$2,000-2,500 per month. According to a former Russian diplomat now earning six-figures at TNK-BP, his wife, a second secretary with several years of service, currently earns only \$800 per month, about the same as someone working in a restaurant or hotel and less than a Moscow construction worker. She has persevered in order to gain the experience and job skills that could translate into a plum private sector job. Such a situation means the MFA may have difficulty retaining diplomats who are set to enter the middle ranks, where they are needed most. This situation could change, however, if the current financial crisis limits private sector employment and makes a government job appear more stable.

¶12. (SBU) According to former Russian diplomats, for those who decide to stay in the ministry, an office director equivalent can look forward to earning around \$2000 per month and a DAS equivalent \$4000. In contrast, the average salary for an employee at a bank branch is \$3,000 per month. Diplomats working in Moscow supplement their earnings through per diem received for TDYs and attending foreign conferences. The goal for many is to serve overseas, which means extra pay and benefits.

#### Vagaries of the Assignments Process

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MOSCOW 00003086 003 OF 004

¶13. (SBU) Unlike our relatively structured assignments process that provides some certainty as to the amount of time one may spend in the Department or at post, Russian diplomats often have a hard time saying how long they will remain in Moscow. The junior attaches who arrive at the Ministry immediately after school can be there for a few months or four to five years, depending upon the department in which they work. New attaches assigned to the Middle East and North Africa Department can quickly find themselves heading to an embassy that is short staffed, while junior or mid-level officers in the North America or European departments might be there for an extended period. The MFA will not teach these diplomats new languages, so they are limited to serving in the embassies that require the languages they already have. Their situation is compounded by the glacial promotion process, which makes the Department appear to move at warp speed.

¶14. (SBU) According to our contacts, there is no time limit for remaining in Moscow, and Russian diplomats must agree to an assignment. There are no directed assignments, which has caused considerable difficulty staffing hardship or hazardous postings such as Baghdad, which relies upon contractors that serve in a diplomatic capacity.

¶15. (SBU) After an overseas assignment that typically lasts four years, Russian diplomats return to Moscow to work in

their geographic bureaus. While there are no professional cones for Russian diplomats, they tend to work throughout their careers within a geographic specialization determined by the foreign language they studied in school. This hold-over from the Soviet period is slowly changing as more diplomats work on multilateral or global issues. Second Secretary Alexander Trofimov worked in Buenos Aires before dealing with non-proliferation issues in the MFA Department for Security and Disarmament Affairs; he next goes to Washington.

Location, Location, Location  
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¶16. (SBU) Working in Moscow presents a unique set of challenges for Russian diplomats, requiring them to have a home in one of the most expensive cities in the world. While there are similarities to American FSOs fretting about losing their hardship and language differential by taking a position in the Department, Russian diplomats can look forward to returning to a Brezhnev-era apartment block and not a house in Fairfax. Astronomically high real estate prices mean that in most instances, they must already own an apartment in Moscow, a situation that helps ensure that the MFA remains dominated by Muscovites who had an apartment ceded to their families at the end of communism or who bought one in the 1990s. Diplomats from elsewhere in Russia are rare, as they cannot afford to rent or buy a home in the capital.

¶17. (SBU) One diplomat from St. Petersburg explained how he did three consecutive postings in Africa, an atypical occurrence that may have hurt his career, because he could not afford to rent in Moscow. He finally landed one of a handful of subsidized apartments the MFA has for its officers. Ivan Gorbunov, an MFA veteran of 12 years and one-half of a rare tandem couple, said that he and his wife took postings in Belgrade soon after joining the MFA because they could not afford to live in Moscow. Only through savings from both incomes could the couple afford to purchase an apartment and work at the Ministry, where he heads the Bosnia desk and she covers Croatia and Montenegro.

The "Results of Feminism"  
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¶18. (SBU) Russian diplomats have told us that the booming Moscow economy has made remaining at the MFA a more lucrative proposition for those with spouses employed in the private sector. In the male-dominated MFA, this means that working wives are typically earning more than their government-employed husbands. Their joint incomes make it possible to enjoy Moscow's vibrant consumer culture, and provide a disincentive to go overseas, leading to a greater reliance on junior officers to fill embassy positions.

¶19. (SBU) Afghan desk chief Yuri Kholkhov said that his wife earns more than he does by working at a car dealership, which makes it difficult to leave Moscow now that they have a baby. Iraq desk officer Elbrus Kutrashev commented that the MFA now has to deal with the "results of feminism" and is examining ways to provide incentives for married diplomats to go overseas. This will be difficult to achieve, as the

MOSCOW 00003086 004 OF 004

Ministry has little experience helping spouses find employment. Kutrashev lamented that his wife would soon have to give up her job when the family heads to Damascus. The consolation of the posting being that the large Russian presence means a good school for their children.

Limited School Choices Overseas  
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¶20. (SBU) Russian diplomats have complained of the limited school choices they have for their children when posted overseas. Unlike English speakers, who can easily find

overseas English language schools, Russians are typically limited to the single school run by their embassy. In smaller posts, there might not be a Russian school, or the school may only go from grades one to four, significantly limiting assignment possibilities. Africa Department Counselor Andrei Stolyarov said that in three-person African posts where there are no Russian schools, an embassy may have an ambassador whose children are grown and an unmarried junior officer. The married with children mid-level officer bears the burden of leaving his family in Moscow.

Comment

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¶21. (SBU) Salaries, assignments, and schools: Russian diplomats may share some of the same concerns as American FSOs, but their experience is in many ways different. The meager salaries earned by Russian diplomats make life particularly difficult in Moscow, where inflation is currently 12 percent and even foreign diplomats have a hard time getting by with their extra benefits. Medvedev and FM Lavrov have said that raising pay and addressing the contemporary needs of diplomats and their families is a priority, but until the large number of under-30 professionals move up through the ranks, the ministry will continue to be run by "traditionalists" who joined under communism.

¶22. (SBU) The MFA appears more like the Department did in another age, with no attempt to hide sexism, a rigid top-down management style, limited use of modern communications technology, and what appears to be a Soviet-like effort to maintain control of information and contacts with foreign diplomats (septel). While we frequently meet open and engaging Russian diplomats, the unique nature of the MFA contributes to the challenging environment in which we work.  
BEYRLE